

INTERNATIONAL
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'Iron Lady' bears burden of reviving Liberia

By John Donnelly The Boston Globe

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HARBEL, Liberia Liberia's celebrated new president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, was facing a crowd of rubber tree tappers, who at first cheered heartily.

Under a broiling sun, the first woman to be elected democratically as a president in Africa told the several thousand workers at a Firestone rubber plantation here earlier this month that she would deliver better education for their children and improve living conditions for their families. But she also said that after negotiating with Firestone, she could not force the U.S. company to pay millions of dollars in a pay dispute dating from 1994.

The mood turned. Many booed. One shouted: "Not good, Ellen! We want our money!"

"You can't satisfy everybody," she told the crowd.

Just four months into her six-year term, Johnson Sirleaf, a 67-year-old Harvard-educated economist, is winning acclaim abroad. She has been to see President George W. Bush at the White House and last week traveled to Chicago to appear on Oprah Winfrey's popular television talk show.

But in her West African homeland, she is learning that turning around one of the world's most devastated countries will be much tougher, and will make her more unpopular, than she had imagined.

"It's easy when you are outside looking in than when you get in and face the reality," she said in an interview in her sparsely decorated executive office a day before the plantation appearance.

Fourteen years of war destroyed Liberia's infrastructure, leaving it with no electricity, running water or sewage systems. It also gave rise to a warlord culture of killing and stealing public money and resources, led most notoriously by Charles Taylor. Taylor, the former president, is now in jail in Sierra Leone, but he still can call upon many armed loyalists in Liberia, raising the threat of renewed civil strife.

Johnson Sirleaf made the appearance on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" hoping to generate awareness about Liberia and financial support from Americans. But she turned down invitations to deliver commencement addresses at her alma mater, the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard, and three other U.S. colleges because she feels so much pressure at home.

Emblematic of the challenges facing Johnson Sirleaf is her pledge to restore electricity to Monrovia within six months of taking office. But she acknowledged that only two areas in the capital, covering less than 15 percent of the population, will have power by the end of June.

"We will not meet the full expectations for power or for many other things," said Johnson Sirleaf, who aides say arrives at work at 8 a.m. and leaves at 11 p.m. "Expectations are high. But we are going to meet basic commitments, and there will be progress in all these areas."

For the soft-spoken president, who is called both the Iron Lady, for her fiscal toughness, and the Mother of Liberia, because of what she calls her "motherly touch," restoring the necessities of life is

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part of her rebuilding strategy. For 20 uninterrupted minutes, she outlined her program in detail, rattling off half a dozen acronyms of international aid programs that she knows well from years as a senior official at the World Bank and the United Nations Development Program in Africa.

Liberia owes nearly \$3 billion in debt run up by former warlord presidents. Despite that debt, Johnson Sirleaf said, the World Bank has earmarked more than \$60 million in grants to Liberia since she took office in January.

Liberia cannot take on new loans until it pays back or wins forgiveness for large portions of the debt, the latter of which Johnson Sirleaf hopes to accomplish soon. Then, she said, Liberia could secure loans from China, for example, to rebuild roads and other infrastructure.

Next month, she hopes the UN Security Council will lift timber and diamond sanctions imposed during the years of war, freeing valuable resources for the country. She wants closer ties with Europe. So far, she has traveled to France and Switzerland, and later this month will go to Britain for a state visit.

The relationship with the United States remains critical, though. The ties between the countries go back to 1822, when three ships of freed American slaves landed just offshore of what would become the steamy port city of Monrovia, named for President James Monroe. This year, the U.S. government, Liberia's largest donor, has given at least \$100 million, \$19 million more than the country's national budget.

Yet the needs are overwhelming. The capital smells of rotten garbage in many quarters, as the city's five trucks and 75 street sweepers are no match for the waste of 1.5 million people. The air is foul from the exhaust of barely functioning vehicles. Most telephone lines have not worked since 2003, when rebels sabotaged the system.

Public workers, most earning just \$20 a month, politely ask visitors for a few dollars to buy food for their families. Monrovia's Executive Grounds, home to past presidents, is a stately hovel and home to hundreds of squatters.

There is not a single cinema or bookstore in the country. Illiteracy is 80 percent, unemployment 85 percent.

"So much is expected of her," said Gibson Jerue, news editor of the daily newspaper *Analyst*. "She comes in at a time when people want almost everything to be done, and all at once."

In November, Johnson Sirleaf convincingly won the presidency in a runoff against the former soccer player George Weah. While Weah was perhaps the most famous person in Liberia, Johnson Sirleaf was so well known that most voters called her Ellen.

She grew up in Monrovia, married an agricultural economist after finishing high school and had four sons. She received a bachelor's degree in accounting at Madison College of Business in Wisconsin in 1964, an economics degree at the University of Colorado in 1970 and a master's degree in public administration at Harvard in 1971.

Returning to Liberia, she began working in the government and for the next four decades became immersed in the country's tumultuous politics. She rose to become finance minister in 1979. She joined the opposition in 1980 after an army sergeant, Samuel Doe, overthrew the elected government.

Like many opposition members, she plotted to topple Doe, throwing her support behind Taylor. She was jailed twice in those years, including once for eight months, in 1985.

After Taylor killed two of her friends, she said, she cut ties. In 1997, she ran for president against him, losing by a wide margin. Taylor was forced from office in 2003, after rebel forces from the north laid siege to Monrovia, and international negotiators worked out a cease-fire in which Taylor won asylum in Nigeria, UN troops arrived and an interim government was formed.

The civil war had killed a quarter-million people. Even today, with 15,000 UN troops keeping the peace, doubts remain about security.

In March, facing pressure from the United States and human rights groups, Johnson Sirleaf asked President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria to extradite Taylor to stand trial in Sierra Leone for fueling

that country's war. Obasanjo had long said that Taylor could remain in Nigeria unless an elected Liberian president asked for his extradition. After Johnson Sirleaf's election, some of her cabinet ministers said international donors threatened to cut funding unless she did so.

Across the street from the president's mansion is the Parliament, where several former warlords and Taylor's wife are elected representatives.

The senior senator from rural Nimba County is Prince Yormie Johnson, whose troops briefly held Monrovia after he ordered his men to torture Doe to death in 1990. Monrovia street vendors sell a bootleg video of the killing, in which Johnson's soldiers cut off Doe's ears.

The senior senator from Bong County is Taylor's third wife, Jewel Howard Taylor, whose corner office has red wall- to-wall carpeting and a framed photograph of the senator and Hillary Rodham Clinton meeting in 2000 in the White House. Taylor, 43, said she disagreed with the arrest of her husband, but changed the subject to her role today.

"I'm just happy to be a senator, which gives me a chance to be a positive role model for young women," she said.

Many Liberians are hoping for the best.

In a teahouse in central Monrovia, Alison Kromeh, 35, defeated eight men in a row at checkers. She said she drew inspiration from her president.

"I think Ellen and I have the same feeling: She feels she can do better than a man, and I feel the same," said Kromeh, a police captain and mother of five. "I believe in challenges. Ellen does, too."

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