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One New Light in Liberia, an Inch Back From Abyss

By [LYDIA POLGREEN](#)

MONROVIA, [Liberia](#), July 26 — The way Karpah Toe runs his snack stand, much of the 20th century might as well never have happened. He sells soft drinks on the side of the road from a lean-to shack, but he does not own a fridge. Instead, he keeps the bottles cold with blocks of ice he buys every morning for about 50 cents and hauls to his shop in a wheelbarrow.

“If you don’t have light, you don’t have fridge,” he said, pointing up to the dead-end electricity poles that tower over Tubman Boulevard, one of this broken-down city’s main thoroughfares. A tangle of wires hung from them, limp and leading nowhere.

For more than 14 years, Liberia has lived in darkness, literally and figuratively. Monrovia, Liberia’s capital, was ravaged repeatedly during the country’s 14-year civil war, and one of the first casualties was its electricity system. In the warlords’ battle to control swaths of the country, they deliberately attacked its infrastructure, blowing up generators and transformers, machine gunning poles into Swiss cheese.

But on Wednesday, Liberia’s 159th independence day, electric lights once again shone on Tubman Boulevard. Or at least a few of them did, anyway.

Fulfilling in spirit, if not to the letter, a campaign promise to bring electricity back to Monrovia by independence day, Liberia’s new president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, turned on an emergency power system to carry electricity to hospitals and streetlights on a handful of streets in one neighborhood here in the capital.

It is one of the first halting steps on the road back to normalcy in a country where war has drained the economy, stripped the infrastructure and exhausted the population of three million.

At a ceremony organized to commemorate the occasion, Ms. Johnson Sirleaf said she might have bitten off more than she could chew. “When I made this commitment during the campaign period,” she told a crowd assembled at a local hospital, “I was an outsider looking in.”

But once she took office, “I had to scramble,” she said. “We have not met our entire goals. We had hoped to have electricity to more parts of our city by today. But we have kept part of the promise, as we turn on these lights.”

The effort to get the lights back on was much tougher than anyone had expected.

After years of war that drove most of the country's best minds into exile, few qualified engineers were available to help plan the work. Shipping supplies was expensive and took a long time because the port had not been dredged in years, making it impossible for regular ships to stop here.

And the Ghanaian engineers who came to help get the lights back on were taken aback by the state of the country's infrastructure.

"We found utter destruction," said Kweku Arkerst of the Volta River Authority, the Ghanaian power company that won the contract to build the new generation plant. "It was worse than nothing. A total mess."

It was a surprising reversal, [Ghana](#) helping Liberia.

In the 1970's, Liberia, a nation settled by freed slaves from America, was the jewel of the region. It had become a wealthy bastion of progress spurred by corporate American investment in its iron, rubber and timber industries, while Ghana suffered through bloody military rule and economic chaos.

Now Ghana is considered one of the most stable and peaceful nations in the region, and Liberia needs a helping hand.

With scant running water and no electricity beyond scattered individual generators, with almost nonexistent health and education systems and a broken government just beginning to repair itself, much of Liberia, like Mr. Toe's shop, makes do with technology from another time.

Wheelbarrows, candles and charcoal stoves are the stuff of everyday life.

Half the nation's children are out of school; unemployment in some places reaches 80 percent.

"This is a country that needs everything, and needs everything at once," [Paul D. Wolfowitz](#), the president of the [World Bank](#), said on a visit here last week.

The Executive Mansion, a dilapidated seaside building that serves as the president's office, is so run down that most of its toilets do not flush automatically — their tanks must be filled from a barrel of water next to the bowl.

As if to underscore its decrepitude, the building caught fire on independence day, billowing smoke and flame and forcing the president and her guests — including the presidents of Ghana, [Ivory Coast](#) and [Sierra Leone](#) — to evacuate from a planned party.

There were no major injuries, and it was too soon to say what caused the fire, officials at the mansion said. But the

damage to the building was extensive.

In an interview, Ms. Johnson Sirleaf decided to emphasize electricity because even beyond its economic importance, it has deep symbolic value.

“Even though we have a long way to go, at least we have reinforced hope,” Ms. Johnson Sirleaf said. “We have brought back what we call finally the light at the end of the tunnel. Finally light has taken over from darkness. And that for us is a great thing, even though right now it is quite limited.”

The small emergency power plant will supply two hospitals and run some streetlights. It cost more than \$6 million, with most of the money coming from the United States and the [European Union](#).

Ms. Johnson Sirleaf said restoring power was just one of a long list of things the country needed to do. It has \$3.7 billion in debt that it has no hope of paying. This debt should be forgiven as soon as possible, said Alan Doss, chief of the [United Nations](#) mission in Liberia. Some of the country’s main industries, like iron ore mining, are moribund, while others, like diamond mining, are still under embargoes dating from the war.

There has been progress, though. The old army has been dissolved and a new one is being trained. It has been drawn from all across the country to avoid ethnic splits and is well versed in human rights.

Other problems bedevil the Johnson Sirleaf administration: not having enough qualified judges and lawyers has left the justice system in tatters. And of course, for all the excitement about the new streetlights, they cover just a tiny portion of the city, never mind the whole country.

But the rest is coming, Ms. Johnson Sirleaf said.

“Small light today, big light tomorrow,” she said, then flipped the switch to turn on Liberia’s first new streetlight.

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