

Fixing Liberia, one light at a time

Salil Tripathi | WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 2, 2006

MONROVIA, Liberia I'm staring at the deep-blue Atlantic, with the gentle wind swaying the palm trees, as the waves lash the beachfront. It is idyllic, and so are the rest of my surroundings: a luxury hotel where a large screen shows reruns of the World Cup, and chefs are preparing a Mongolian barbecue. A restaurant across the road is serving sushi.

We are in Africa, I remind myself. In Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, a country that has been ravaged by a civil war that has killed thousands of people and devastated its infrastructure.

There was a time, barely a generation ago, when Monrovia was regarded as the queen of cities in West Africa. Today, those images remain in the minds of older citizens who can remember the years before the war. For many others, the only memory is of the terrible war. The images of a tranquil Monrovia linger on a few Web sites.

Recreating that halcyon era sounds impossible. Liberia's president, the continent's first woman head of state, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, is aware of her country's limitations. To mark the anniversary of Liberia's founding on July 26, she said she would light up Monrovia.

But not in the self-indulgent or bizarre way that other African leaders have celebrated in the past. When Jean-Bedel Bokassa of the Central African Republic declared himself emperor, the cost of the ceremonies was said to have amounted to nearly a quarter of the country's wealth.

Johnson Sirleaf's idea of celebration was to bring electricity to her people. Harvey Gilbert, who used to work as a plumber when the city's pipes carried water but who is now a driver, says: "We have children who have never seen water come out of the tap. We have teenagers who have never seen street lights. She is doing the right thing."

It is a hard task. Almost every third street lamp is crooked, precariously hanging on, its bulbs stolen. Power lines have fallen by the wayside, their cables cut and stolen. Telephones, even in nicer hotels, perform one useful function - connecting you to various hotel services. To call anyone elsewhere, you have to use your cellular phone.

The late Agha Shahid Ali, the Kashmiri poet, described his beautiful, mountainous homeland as a country without

a post office; the same could be said about Liberia. Don't send me anything by post, one activist tells me.

There are no jobs either; the biggest employer is the international community.

No country deserves this, but in Liberia's case, the misery is all the more unnecessary. As Africa's first republic, Liberia was spared the legacy of colonialism and endowed with resources that could have made it shine like a beacon.

Traveling through Liberia in 1935, Graham Greene wrote in "Journey Without Maps" that he found a country with genial, friendly people who could teach manners and civilization to his compatriots in Britain. But over the last two decades, Samuel Doe, and later Charles Taylor, unleashed a reign of terror first within the state, and then beyond: to see its effects, travel to Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone, where you will find children and adults with amputated limbs, victims of the sadistic cruelty of the Revolutionary United Front, the armed group in Sierra Leone that Taylor supported, in return for diamonds.

Today Doe is gone, executed brutally, the RUF defeated, and Taylor is in the Hague, a defendant in a war crimes trial. The real cost is borne by Liberians who are trying to piece together their lives.

That old, dangerous Liberia lurks behind the corner: Even as Johnson Sirleaf switched on the lights, her presidential palace, where she was to meet leaders of Ghana, Ivory Coast and Sierra Leone, was ablaze in a mysterious fire. It took hours to put it out.

Liberia needs sustained international goodwill - not only from its neighbors, but from all of us: not only to ensure that water flows when those children turn on the taps, not only so that letters are written again and delivered, but also so that its children go to schools again, where there are teachers, blackboards, benches and textbooks. And that it stays lit. Those are small dreams, not grand visions.

But Africa has had too many grand visionaries. As Liberia moves from darkness to light, it is fine to walk one step at a time. A long journey begins with a single step, and Johnson Sirleaf is doing just that - lighting up one road at a time.

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