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World

## Liberian President Brings Message of Hope to U.S.



Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, president of Liberia, has become a trailblazer in global politics as Africa's only elected female head of state, shown here in an inaugural photo. Getty Images

*Tell Me More*, May 17, 2007 · Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf hailed the progress her country has made since it emerged from civil war in 2003 as she visited the United States this week, consolidating support for the West African nation as it attempts to rebuild its infrastructure and cement its hard-won peace.

Johnson Sirleaf, who in 2006 became the first woman elected to lead an African nation, spoke in Washington, D.C., with *Tell Me More's* Michel Martin about the challenges she faces in her drive to improve the quality of life for Liberia's nearly 4 million citizens.

For 15 years, the country's capital, Monrovia, had no electricity and was completely dark at night. When asked what she's seen changing since she took office, her answer was clear: Hope.

"Today, people are out on the streets, even in the night ... no longer fearful. You can see [that] intimidation is gone," Johnson Sirleaf said. "Children are back in their uniforms going to school. You can look in people's faces, and no longer [do] you see despair, disappointment and dismay."

Liberia still faces issues it has yet to solve, including an external debt of nearly \$4 billion. In February, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced that her country would forgive about \$390 million in debt. Rice said the people of Liberia do not "deserve" it. Johnson Sirleaf agrees, saying it's unfair to saddle future generations with the mistakes of the past.

"We also point out that much of this debt was accumulated through bad governance, and that ... a lot of it is bogus debt," Johnson Sirleaf said. "It's not fair for our young children to inherit this debt from which they received very little benefits."

Johnson Sirleaf is only a year and a half into her six-year presidential term, and she has a seemingly endless to-do list, but she said she has not grown impatient.

"I cannot afford to be impatient. I must keep my head above water and keep pushing," she said.

Pushing forward is something the former cleaning woman is very good at doing. Johnson Sirleaf was born in Monrovia and, eventually, was educated at both African and U.S. universities. She has been a business executive, a World Bank economist and Liberia's finance minister.



Johnson Sirleaf is an international advocate for her nation's interest, shown here in March 2007 at Tokyo's Imperial Palace with Japanese Emperor Akihito. Getty Images

*"You can look in people's faces and no longer [do] you see despair, disappointment and dismay."*

*Ellen Johnson Sirleaf*

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In the 1980s, she was briefly imprisoned for criticizing her government's regime. Her first run for the presidency was in 1997. Although it was unsuccessful, she didn't allow defeat to deter her from achieving her goal of leading Liberia.

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