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As the G-8 meets, some modest requests from Africa

By Ellen Johnson Sirleaf

Commentary by

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has put Africa squarely on the agenda of this week's Group of Eight summit. We in Liberia and across Africa welcome her leadership, and are grateful for the G-8's support for Africa, particularly its commitments in recent years to reduce debt burdens, double aid by 2010, expand trade access, and fight HIV-AIDS. Strong efforts by Africans, coupled with the investments of the G-8 and other partners, are paying off in important ways that are often unnoticed by the outside world.

Consider three major historical trends. First, in 1989, there were just four democracies in Africa. Today, there are at least 18, including South Africa, Mozambique, Tanzania, Benin, Mali, Ghana, Senegal, with Liberia the most recent to join the group. Second, economic policies have greatly improved. With few exceptions, gone are the days of dual exchange rates, hyperinflation, and extensive trade barriers. Third, for many countries, the 25-year-old debt crisis is finally over, allowing much higher investment in health, education, and infrastructure.

These three trends overlap in a group of about 15 African countries that are strongly committed to accountable governance and sensible economic policies. These countries are putting more kids in school, vigorously fighting diseases, and creating new economic opportunities for the poor. Average incomes have increased by 25 percent over the last decade - a far cry from the zero growth of the past. Their recovery is still fragile, but it is real and tangible, and it is providing new hope across the continent.

Most of the credit for these changes goes to Africans who demanded an end to the misrule of the past. But the commitments by the G-8 and other key partners - such as the Nordic states and the Netherlands - also have played a critical role.

The dual challenges are to sustain this progress in countries where it has started, and to initiate it in others. The G-8 can take four steps toward these ends. First, it can ensure that its members are on track to double aid to Africa by 2010. While progress has been made, it appears several countries are falling behind on this pledge. Second, it can focus new resources in critical areas such as education, malaria treatment, agriculture, and infrastructure, and ensure that most funding goes to well-governed countries. Third, it can complete the process of debt relief for countries that have not received it, and help protect poor countries from predatory commercial creditors. Finally, it can expand market access for African exporters, especially by redoubling efforts to complete the Doha round of global trade talks.

My own country, Liberia, embodies Africa's emerging hope and the progress that can be made through a commitment to good governance and strong international support. Just four years ago we were enmeshed in a brutal 14-year civil war that claimed 270,000 lives, destroyed the fabric of our communities, and reduced average income by over 80 percent. Liberia was Africa's basket case.

Today, the war is over. Through two rounds of free and democratic elections in 2005, the people of Liberia courageously chose peace, reconciliation, and development over ethnic divisions and violence. Since then revenues have doubled, the economy is growing by 8 percent per year, school enrollment is up 50 percent, and electricity and water have been restored to parts of Monrovia for the first time in 15 years. Families are being reunited, and, after years of suffering, there is finally hope for the future.

Liberians have made tremendous sacrifices. But Liberia's dramatic turnaround would not have been possible without the support of the United Nations' peacekeepers, the G-8, the European Union, and other partners around the world.

Nevertheless, our recovery remains fragile and our success is far from assured. It will take years to rebuild physical infrastructure, establish strong institutions, and heal the wounds of war. As has been the case in some other countries, a return to conflict remains a threat if a clear peace dividend does not quickly materialize throughout the country.

The stakes for Liberia and for the region could not be higher. But the challenges are enormous, and we will be unable to meet them without strong international support to help rebuild schools and clinics, put children back in school, and provide the foundation for vibrant private-sector growth. With this support, in a few years we will be able to stand on our own two feet again.

Debt relief is at the heart of the support we need. Our external debt exceeds \$4 billion, more than 3,000 percent of annual exports. Most of this is accumulated interest on loans borrowed by rapacious

dictators of the past. We have met all of the conditions asked by the international community to start the debt relief process, but creditor countries have not yet agreed on the financing. We hope that the G-8 can help finalize these arrangements, and can help ensure that the costs of debt relief are shared among all creditors, including those from the private sector.

The people of Liberia are grateful for the strong support we have received as we have moved from the crisis of the past to the opportunity of the present. We hope you will continue to stand with us as we fight to secure peace, provide basic freedoms, and create the opportunity to rebuild our lives.

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