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Feature Stories

## **New Liberian President Seeks to Rehabilitate Country's Education System**

By Tracie Powell

Jun 14, 2007, 08:38

### ATLANTA

Troubled by the difficulties of training teachers in Liberia, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf says she hopes to attract them from U.S. colleges and universities.

Sirleaf envisions the Liberian Education Trust as a way to help repair a country devastated by two civil wars. The trust seeks to raise money so that the Liberia can build 50 schools, train 500 teachers and offer 5,000 scholarships to students, principally girls. While efforts to restore the country's infrastructure are well underway, Liberia still faces obstacles in finding teachers.

"Recruiting teachers remains a challenge," Sirleaf told *Diverse* while on a trip to the United States. "The output from the universities has not produced enough teachers. We do have a teacher training college, but the institutions that were built specifically for this purpose were also destroyed during the war."

Liberia's 'Iron Lady' was in Atlanta to deliver the commencement address at Spelman College and to accept an honorary degree from the historic Black college for women.

Founded in 1822 for freed slaves, Liberia declared its independence from the United States in 1847, becoming modern Africa's oldest republic. But the country was engulfed in civil war from 1989 to 1996, and again between 1999 and 2003. During that time, student enrollments plummeted and schools were pillaged and destroyed. Those schools left standing were woefully overcrowded, according to media reports.

The country has not quite recovered.

Such destabilization led to nearly half of Liberia's school-age children not attending school. Recognizing that education is the key to the country's redevelopment efforts, Sirleaf abolished public school tuition fees and returned the tuition fees that private schools had previously paid to the government. As a result, Sirleaf says, school enrollment increased by about 40 percent, especially among girls.

Liberia's cash-strapped central government has struggled to support the nation's higher education institutions, pushing the financial burden onto students and their families, concludes a two-year-old report by the country's Minister of Education. "The education system in Liberia has always been one of the weakest in sub-Saharan Africa, due to lack of resources, weak government commitment, poor infrastructures, and very weak economic and institutional overall context," the report states.

The government issued the Liberian Education Master Plan, a 10-year prospectus to rehabilitate the education system. The plan has only recently been revised, Sirleaf says, and will be enhanced with efforts to attract private dollars and strategic partnerships.

Before arriving in Atlanta, Sirleaf stopped in Washington, D.C., to raise money for Liberia's education initiative, getting help from U.S. presidential hopeful U.S. Sen. Hillary Clinton, D-N.Y. The fundraiser brought in about \$350,000, Sirleaf says, which will be used for programs associated with the Liberian Education Trust.

Money from the trust has already helped to build 16 schools, award 1,200 scholarships and train about 100 teachers, Sirleaf says. As part of the trust, the Liberian government also launched a literacy program for market women. Teaching the women how to read and write will help them carry out their trading businesses, Sirleaf says.

But finding teachers is still the country's biggest problem. Money from the trust fund will also be used to pay teacher salaries and cover tuition costs for training, Sirleaf says.

Meanwhile, she says, she's in talks with U.S. colleges to develop strategic partnerships to bring American educators to Liberia as part of a teacher exchange program.

--Tracie Powell

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