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Liberian President tells Haaretz: Africa is gaining power and hope

By Lior Kodner, Haaretz Correspondent

It would be no exaggeration to say that Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf is the second most important person in Africa. Like Nelson Mandela, the 69-year-old president of Liberia symbolizes the other Africa, a continent with leadership, economic growth, an independent education system and, above all, a continent with hope for a better future.

On November 8, 2005, Johnson-Sirleaf became the first woman to be elected to the top leadership position in an African country. She heads one of the poorest countries on the continent, a country that is still recovering from two civil wars in which at least 200,000 people were killed and one-third of the inhabitants became refugees. Her country has done much in the past two years, she told Haaretz on Tuesday in an interview during a three-day visit in Israel for a women's leadership conference organized by the Foreign Ministry.

"We have been able to sustain the development of political forces and maintaining peace, we restored our lateral and bilateral relationships with foreign states and institutions, we started to fix our roads, we brought lights and water to the capital city for the first time in 14 years, we are repairing schools and clinics and hospitals all over the country, we settled our refugees, we are fighting corruption. So it's quite big, but we still have a long way to go."

Foreign leaders and international groups have praised Johnson-Sirleaf's struggle against corruption and her determination to ensure transparency in the giant tenders for infrastructure reconstruction. But despite the rosy future Johnson-Sirleaf promises, the bloody past continues to loom.

"Our peace can only be saved by peace in all neighbor countries. The record shows that in five years if the leadership didn't response to the needs of the people chances are they can slip back to conflict," Johnson-Sirleaf said.

A special commission in Liberia is investigating human-rights infractions during the last civil wars, but militia leaders who

carried out cruel murders are today members of parliament. One senior figure is Prince Johnson, who was responsible for the murder of the previous president, Samuel Doe. Recently-released video footage shows Doe drinking beer while his men are cutting off Doe's ear, shots that did not lead to his ejection from parliament.

"In Liberian circumstances we believe in redemption," Johnson-Sirleaf responded with some unease. "Those people were elected by their people, we respect the choice of their people and as long they are committed to the policies of the government, we can commit to a partnership."

Charles Taylor is a rebel leader who was president until August 2003 and then fled the country. He is now standing trial in the International Court of Justice in The Hague, not for the enormous damage he did in his own country, but for crimes against humanity in neighboring Sierra Leone. Johnson-Sirleaf, who supported Taylor in the past, is not anxious to discuss it, but says his trial is "good for Liberia and it's good for Africa."

Johnson-Sirleaf seems to want to represent not only her country, but all of Africa. "I think Africa is on the way up," she says.

China is now a major player in Africa, investing billions of dollars mainly in Sudan, Chad and Angola. But China has also won major tenders in Libya, and Johnson-Sirleaf says the Chinese are creating competition, and competition is always a good thing. The president also believes it will attract Western investments.

Johnson-Sirleaf's Israel visit is also intended to strengthen this competition. She wants to involve Israeli companies in her country's economy. Now that the United Nations has determined that Liberia no longer has blood diamonds, Liberia is looking forward to a renewal of cooperation with Israeli diamond merchants. Among dozens of meetings and a festive speech in the Knesset, Johnson-Sirleaf, a devout Christian, has also asked to visit some of the Holy Places in Jerusalem.

The president's gender is a significant element in her political agenda. One of her campaign slogans was "Ellen - she's our man," but she promised to bring a motherly touch to her post. Like Margaret Thatcher or Angela Merkel, Johnson-Sirleaf has also been dubbed "the Iron Lady." She does not really like the name. "The perception is that if you are good performing woman it means you are strong, and if you are strong you have muscular habits, but I think it is breaking down now," she says.

For years, Johnson-Sirleaf had to be away from her country; she studied at Harvard and worked abroad. But she hopes the

younger generation of leaders will be able to stay in Africa. "I think that was a response to the fact that all our institutions were underdeveloped. I think the real challenge is to build our own institution, that's what we are trying to do," she says.

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