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Concluding Talks with U.S. Congressional Leaders, President Sirleaf Receives Assurances Aid to Liberia Will Be Protected; Addresses Institute for Peace, USAID Forum

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(WASHINGTON, D.C., JUNE 24, 2011): President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf concluded two days of intensive discussions with U.S. congressional leaders in Washington, D.C. on Friday, June 24th, receiving assurances that Liberia would be spared as the Administration seeks deep budget cuts that would impact foreign assistance.

In meetings with the House Foreign Affairs Committee and with Members of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on State and Foreign Operations, the President stated the case for Liberia. She thanked the Congress, the Administration, and the American people for support to preserve the peace, starting in 2004. She informed the membership of the progress Liberia had made in the security sector, to revitalize its economy, promote good governance and the rule of law, and to rebuild infrastructure and restore basic services. The United States had provided support for each of the sectors, the President observed.



Given the successes as well as the challenges, and with 2011 being a defining year for Liberia in terms of presidential and general elections later this year, the President urged the House leadership to stand by Liberia and to maintain funding at current levels. The President informed the Representatives that should Liberia continue on the path her administration had set, use its resources well and fix the country's infrastructure, Liberia will not need foreign aid in 10 years. She went further to declare that for the longer term, by 2030, Liberia should become a middle-income country.

Among the challenges Liberia faced, President Sirleaf pointed out, was the large youth unemployment of mostly uneducated and unskilled former child soldiers; the plight of the over 150,000 refugees from Côte d'Ivoire still on Liberian soil, where the funding promised to support them was slow in coming; and the armed mercenaries crossing the border who could destabilize the country in an already volatile sub-region.

When asked in what specific areas the United States could assist Liberia, the President mentioned the country's urgent need to get its hydro power plant operating again, taking advantage of the country's vast water resource, as hydro power would lead to greater security and faster industrialization while being cost-efficient. Liberia's goal was to eventually produce 1,000 megawatts of hydro power, far above the 64 MW produced in earlier days by the Mount Coffee hydro, and the 21 MW presently available.

Among the legislators with whom the Liberian leader met were: Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, (R-FL)

Chairwoman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and Members of the Committee; Congresswoman Kay Granger, Chairperson, and Nita Lowey, Ranking Member, and Members of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on State and Foreign Operations, including Congressman Jesse Jackson, Jr., who called Liberia a true friend and ally of America and appealed to the Appropriations Subcommittee not to roll back support to Liberia.

President Addresses U.S. Institute for Peace

Addressing the United States Institute of Peace on Friday, President Johnson Sirleaf spoke of Liberia's journey – the state of the nation she inherited, and where her government has taken the country in just five years. After recounting her administration's successes and challenges, the President said the following:

"I stand before you as the leader of a country no longer looking for handouts, but rather a nation in search of true partnership with the United States and the rest of the world. We came to Washington to make the case for sustained foreign assistance to Liberia. We are not seeking an open-ended commitment, but rather support in the next few years of this transition. If that happens, I am confident that, in a decade, Liberia will sustain our own development and not need foreign aid in 10 years. I go further to say that should Liberia stay on the path we are charting, it will join the ranks of middle-income countries by the year 2030."

Concluding, the President said: "Our successes are not merely our own, but the product of hard work by the Liberian people and our friends abroad, such as you in this room. It is our strong belief that Liberia will hit its benchmarks for development and national rebirth, and that the lessons learned from our experience can be applied to our world in transition. Liberia is in business; Liberia is on the move."

In the interactive session, the President fielded questions about how economic growth translates into security; the future of UNMIL in Liberia; the implications for Liberia of instability in Côte d'Ivoire; the role of natural resources and the environment in Liberia's future; the challenges of youth unemployment and intergenerational transfer of skills; how other conflict-affected countries could benefit from Liberia's experience; Liberia's National Action Plan and efforts to tackle discrimination against women; her message to U.S. taxpayers wanting to know how their money was being spent; Liberia's electoral process and institutions; the use of cell phone technology in an "African Spring"; mechanisms for coordinating multilateral and bilateral aid; how to get the Liberian Diaspora involved; and a 10-year old wanted to know how children in America could help their Liberian peers.

USIP board members participating in the event included: Tara Sonenshine, Executive Director; Chester (Chet) Crocker, member; George Moose, Vice Chairman; and Raymond Gilpin, Sustainable Economies Director, who also moderated the program. Guests in the audience included Assistant Secretary of African Affairs Johnnie Carson, and General Carter Ham, Commander, AFRICOM.

Liberian President Meets with USAID Administrator and Staffers

President Sirleaf also participated in a Development Forum, hosted by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) on "Consolidating Democracy and Development in Post-Conflict Liberia," in which she engaged in conversation with USAID Administrator Rajiv Shah and Agency staffers.

"Most of you know the Liberia story," the President told the packed audience, "but repetition was good," and so she told it again. She thanked Steve Radelet, USAID Chief Economist, and all those present who had worked on behalf of Liberia. She credited Radelet with coming up with the idea to give surplus state money back to the counties, today's County Development Funds, which has empowered the people. "Because of you, because of your support of us, that has enabled us to achieve our goals, and with your support Liberia will succeed," the President told the supportive crowd.

The Liberian leader then responded to questions and comments about skepticism on Capitol Hill about

development aid; USAID's procurement management system; the role of the Mano River Union in Liberia and Sierra Leone; entrepreneurship and private sector development; help for young girls of Liberia. Concerning USAID procurement methods, the President encouraged the Agency to "reduce the time from commitment to cash, especially in a post-conflict environment."

President Sirleaf and her delegation depart Washington on Saturday, June 25th, for Columbia, South Carolina, where she will participate in a series of activities culminating, on June 28th, in the Investiture of Bishop David Daniels as President of the Worldwide Grand Council of Bishops of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the first Liberian so honored.

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