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President Sirleaf Advises Harvard Kennedy School's Mason Fellows

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(CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS -- Friday, May 16, 2014)

President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf spent time on Friday afternoon with students of Harvard Kennedy School's Mid-Career Master in Public Administration Edward S. Mason Program. The President, a distinguished alumna Mason Fellow (MC/MPA 1971), shared with current students her experiences as a Fellow and responded to questions.

According to a dispatch from Cambridge, President Sirleaf came to the United States to participate in a two-day Forum, IDEASpHERE, celebrating the launch of a fund-raising campaign for the Harvard Kennedy School. During the visit, her portrait was unveiled, which will hang in the Library of the School.

Suzanne Shende, Associate Director of MPA Programs and Director of the Edward S. Mason Program, welcomed the guests and introduced President Sirleaf, citing her many accolades, distinctions and accomplishments, as well as her challenges and struggles. She encouraged the students that, when they feel challenged, discouraged or even imperiled because of life and death issues, they should "remember the example of a woman who's been called Mama Ellen, the Iron Lady, an Uncompromising Woman, and whom we also welcome and call a Mason Fellow."

Responding, an animated President Sirleaf thanked her Fellows for the great welcome, and said: "In a way it's like coming back home, but it's been so long ago that I don't recognize home anymore. What you're doing is so great, preparing yourselves to go out there and take on the world. It's not going to be easy; most of you are going to head into the public sector where there are great opportunities, great challenges. But the good thing is that if you are determined in what you want to do, and you persevere, you'll succeed. That's the good part about it."

The President continued: "She [Director Shende] characterized me in three ways: Mama Ellen, Iron Lady, and an Uncompromising Woman. If somebody were to ask me today which of those three you think you truly represent,... I think at the end of the day I would say I would want to remain an Iron Lady. Iron signifies strength and courage, but it's not always a strength that's exemplified by force. Sometimes the greatest strength is what I have to go through: tolerance in the midst of complexities; tolerance in the midst of dissent; being able to take the hard knocks as a leader and not pursue retribution, but to remain focused on the course that you want to achieve; and despite all the attempts and all the diversions, that you can chart that course and you can remain focused toward the goal. That's what you're prepared for when you come here. They prepare you to go just down that road."

The President then said she wanted her time with the Fellows to be an open interactive session, so that she could listen to the Fellows' wise advice and rich experiences that she could take back and could make her a better leader. She welcomed their questions and their criticisms.



An animated President Sirleaf stressing a point at the Mason Fellows Program

The students responded, asking the President such questions as how much she relies on the advice of others versus her own counsel; what is it that the people are missing from what leaders are doing, given that there are always complaints that they are doing nothing; what was her key take-away from the Mason Program and how has that helped her as President; how she chooses the people she trusts and how she handles betrayal; her views on the results of the elections in India where the ruling party was soundly defeated; and more.

To the question about what she learned from the Program, President Sirleaf responded: "To set a goal and stick with it, and use everything you have toward achieving that goal. That's why I ran three times; it was only the third time that I won. It's easy to get discouraged, but you must set that goal and stick with it. I think that's what I learned: staying focused."

At the end of the

in Harvard which they



had all signed.

A cross section of Fellows from the Harvard Kennedy School Mason Program at a round table discussion with President Sirleaf

Two Liberians are among the current Mason Fellows: Mrs. Elva Richardson, former Deputy Minister for Administration, Ministry of State for Presidential Affairs; and Mrs. Decontee King-Sackie, newly appointed Deputy Commissioner General for Technical Affairs/Operation of the Liberia Revenue Authority. They formed part of the President's delegation at the various events. For the past 55 years, the Edward S. Mason Fellows Program has been bringing current leaders from around the globe to share their experiences and learn from one another. The Mid-Career Master in Public Administration Edward S. Mason Program is the Harvard Kennedy School's flagship international program. Each year, approximately 80 demonstrated leaders from developing, newly industrialized and transitional economy countries participate in an intensive one-year Master's degree program designed to prepare them to address the world's most compelling development challenges. The emphasis of the program is on developing the broad range of analytical and leadership skills required to initiate and implement major political, social or economic change. Mason Fellows are enrolled in the Mid-Career Master in Public Administration (MC/MPA). Simultaneously, they participate in a year-long co-curricular program that complements the MC/MPA by exposing the Fellows to the ideas and strategies of leading thinkers and practitioners in economic, political, and social development. Participation in the co-curricular program is a requirement, and culminates with the award of the Mason Certificate in Public Policy and Management at the end of the year in addition to the MPA.

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