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Hillary Clinton in Liberia

Nearing the end of her 11-day tour of Africa, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton arrived in the Liberian capital of Monrovia on August 13 and was greeted under pouring rain by hundreds of Liberians waving U.S. and Liberian flags.

Following the welcome at the airport, Clinton went directly to meet with Liberia's President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. Johnson-Sirleaf, who was elected in 2005 following many tumultuous years of political unrest following the nation's civil wars from 1989 to 2003. She has the distinction of being Africa's first elected female head of government.



Speaking at a joint news conference with Johnson-Sirleaf, Clinton recited a list of the Liberian president's accomplishments since taking office in 2006 and said the United States "officially supports what this government is doing."

"We have looked at the entire record that President Sirleaf brings to office, her performance in office, the accomplishments of the government she leads," said Clinton. "And we are supportive and will continue to be so because we think that Liberia is on the right track."

Bloomberg News reported that when asked about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's recommendation that Johnson-Sirleaf be barred from office, Clinton said she was impressed by what Johnson-Sirleaf has done for Liberia since taking office three years ago. "I see a very accomplished leader dedicated to the betterment of the Liberian people," she said.

State Department figures indicate that since the end of Liberia's civil war in 2003, the United States has contributed more than \$750 million in bilateral assistance and more than \$750 million in assessed contributions to the UN Mission in Liberia.

"We have expressed to [Clinton] how grateful we are for the partnership Liberia enjoys with the United States," Johnson-Sirleaf said, acknowledging that support.

Johnson-Sirleaf directed the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which was established by a mandate enacted on May 12, 2005, by Liberia's National Transitional Legislative Assembly to investigate the violent conflicts that occurred during the nation's civil war period. In its final report, the commission recommended that Mrs. Johnson-Sirleaf be banned from future political activity because of her alleged association with one of the country's rebel groups during the country's civil wars. If the legislature acts on the commission's recommendations and enacts them into law before the 2011 presidential poll, they would prohibit Johnson-Sirleaf from running for a second term.

The AP reported that Johnson-Sirleaf acknowledged before the commission in February that she gave up to \$10,000 to the National Patriotic Front (NPF) headed by Charles Taylor. Taylor is now on trial for



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war crimes committed in neighboring Sierra Leone.

Sirleaf, who was elected in 2005, has apologized and said the money she sent while she was in exile was intended for humanitarian services and that she was never a member of Taylor's NPFL. If she was a member, that fact would definitely detract from her suitability to be president.

To understand Taylor's role in Liberia's modern history requires some background, however. For nearly 140 years, Liberia was governed peacefully by Americo-Liberians, the descendants of former American slaves who had won their freedom. The Liberian form of government was modeled after that of the United States. However, in 1980, Master Sergeant (afterwards General) Samuel K. Doe led a bloody military coup and installed himself as the new president. The new regime executed President William R. Tolbert, Jr., who had run Liberia since 1971 and was an ally of the United States.

On December 24, 1989, Charles Taylor, as leader of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), launched a civil war that produced turmoil across Liberia throughout 1990. His forces invaded from the Ivory Coast in an attempt to oust President Doe. Doe's army alienated much of the civilian population by staging brutal counterattacks on Taylor's rebel forces and as the fighting escalated, both sides showed little mercy in killing civilians of rival ethnic groups. It is estimated that more than 10,000 persons died.

In early July 1990, it was reported that the NPFL had split into two factions, which were now fighting each other as well as Doe. The splinter group was led by Prince Yormie Johnson, a former Taylor lieutenant. On September 9, 1990, Johnson's forces captured President Doe and executed him the next day.

Amos Sawyer, a college professor, became interim president. The turmoil continued between the two rebel groups and the Doe government's remaining military forces until November 28, when all three factions signed a cease-fire. Two days later, Prince Johnson's rebels launched a short-lived attack on the military in Monrovia.

Amos Sawyer resigned in 1994, handing power to the Council of State. Taylor was installed as president in 1997, after leading a bloody insurgency backed by Libyan President Muammar al-Gaddafi.

Widespread dissatisfaction with Taylor's totalitarian government led to the Second Liberian Civil War in 1999 when a group called the Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy (LURD), started a rebellion in northern Liberia. In early 2003, a second rebel group, the Movement for Democracy in Liberia, started revolt in the south, and by the summer of 2003, Taylor's government controlled only a third of Liberia.

Taylor resigned on August 11, 2003, as part of the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA), which ended the war. He was flown into exile in Nigeria. He is currently being held in the UN detention unit in The Hague, being tried by the Special Court for Sierra Leone.

Taylor's resignation and exile was followed by a transitional government during the closing months of 2003 and beyond. During the transition, forces of the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL) monitored the ongoing ceasefire. Presidential elections were held on October 11, 2005, followed by a run-off election on November 8, won by Johnson-Sirleaf. Her inauguration on January 16, 2006 was attended by many foreign dignitaries, including U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and First Lady Laura Bush.

Mrs. Johnson-Sirleaf's impressive background as a vice president of several banks undoubtedly makes her one of the most qualified Liberians to help rebuild Liberia's economy, which was devastated by years of civil war. Unfortunately, the years of unrest made the small nation more dependent on outside



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forces, such as the United Nations Mission in Liberia. Though the mission did facilitate a period of stability during Liberia's transitional government period, such an international presence undoubtedly comes with a price. Similarly, Liberia's reliance on U.S. foreign aid will also serve to diminish the nation's independence and ability to operate free from outside pressures.

We do not envy President Johnson-Sirleaf's formidable challenges in bringing her nation back from the devastation wrought by years of civil war. Accomplishing that task without sacrificing Liberian sovereignty to the internationalists dominating both the UN and U.S. foreign policy will be something of a miracle.

Photo of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton with Liberian President Johnson-Sirleaf: AP Images



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